DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 813 JC 020 329

AUTHOR Johnson, Richard
TITLE The Next Frontier of the Student-Centered Classroom: Teaching Students To Recognize Quality Writing through the Use of Peer Evaluation.
PUB DATE 2001-05-00
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Active Learning; Community Colleges; Dissent; Learning Strategies; Opinions; *Participative Decision Making; *Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; *Process Approach (Writing); Skill Development; Student Role; *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; *Writing (Composition); Writing Skills; Writing Strategies

ABSTRACT

This paper argues for peer evaluation of writing, in addition to peer editing, for a complete student-centered learning experience. The proposed peer evaluation model addresses three shortcomings of the current writing class model: (1) instructor workload; (2) the problem of students' writing for an audience of one; and (3) the problem of students' editing each others' work without having first internalized the qualities of good writing. In this model, students submit their papers anonymously to a quality evaluator team in another class. The team uses descriptive words to categorize the papers: "needs work," "on target," and "exceeds expectations." The team works from a scoring rubric to determine the category into which the paper falls. During discussion sessions, dissent is encouraged if a student feels strongly that the rest of the group is misjudging an essay. The teacher's goal in employing peer review is to wean the team from his input as the semester progresses, all the while checking on each team's standards to make sure they are all similar. This method of evaluation has resulted in a reduction in the number of contested grades, in addition to the students' internalization of an idea of quality writing. The act of evaluating becomes a learning experience for the students, with the teacher making in-class comments on essay quality during the evaluation process. Thus, the entire process takes place within the classroom. (NB)

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The Next Frontier of the Student-Centered Classroom:

Teaching Students to Recognize Quality Writing Through the Use of Peer Evaluation

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The story of how I stumbled upon the idea of teaching students to become evaluators of each other's writing is an interesting one, if only because it is the single time I know of when a fresh, useful, and transformative idea ever came to me out of the mouth of a school administrator.

Nearly a decade and a half ago I taught remedial writing in a California public school, working primarily with eleventh graders who had not yet passed their writing proficiency exams. Since these desperate seveteen-year-olds would be denied a diploma if I could not help them pass the exam, it was a high-stakes game indeed.

In addition to teaching my classes, I also happened to be one of the school district's competency exam readers. I soon discovered, between grading my own students' papers from class as well as evaluating competency exams from students elsewhere in the district, that *I* was getting pretty good at recognizing quality writing. *I* was internalizing a pretty good idea of what quality writing looks like. My students weren't necessarily getting better at producing it, but *I* at least was getting better at recognizing what would and what would not pass the competency exam.

I was talking one day with an administrator (here comes the part you've been waiting for) who wrote grant proposals for the school district. Initially, he had not been too successful as a grant writer; he'd never won any big bucks for the district. He never fully understood *how* to

write a grant proposal, he said, until he happened to have the opportunity to serve as a judge on a grant proposal selection committee. The experience of seeing a variety of grant proposals written by people in jobs like his from all over the state, and of having to separate the successful proposals from the unsuccessful ones, taught him, he said, to write better grant proposals of his own. Now he knew what his audience was looking for. Now he understood what worked and what didn't.

Bingo! It occurred to me that my students might benefit from learning what kinds of things we competency exam readers typically looked for. I thought it might help the students to see what other students' passing papers looked like, and to see what it was about their own papers that was keeping them from passing and, ultimately, from graduating. After all, my remedial writing students never got to see what the passing papers actually looked like; all they ever saw were their own failed attempts, one after another after another. So I gave my students copies of other students' papers, some weak, some strong, some that had actually been passed by the judges and some that had been rejected; and so we started our own evaluation sessions, acting as if *we* —the students and me—were the official exam readers.

My students thought I was giving them some kind of secret edge, since I happened to also be one of the official exam readers and knew what my fellow readers looked for. I shewed my students how to make sense of the scoring rubric, and they devoured it as if I had slipped them some crib notes that would finally get them through the exam.

But what really seemed to help them was our mock scoring sessions. Somehow, through the scoring sessions, they figured out what it was those better writers were doing, and they started doing it in their own papers! I didn't need to scribble in the margins of their papers my cryptic guesses about what their writing needed in order to pass; instead, they could see it for themselves. Not only that, they felt motivated to do something about it. Since they were no longer just cranking out assignments for some lonely English teacher, with no real concern for communicating to him anything other than that they wanted to graduate, and since they were, instead, writing papers that would actually be read by their peers, they took a lot more care to

make their writing say just what they wanted it to say, to get the message across just the way they hoped.

They began to internalize the standards of quality writing. The results were startling. The following year, the woman who normally taught twelfth-grade remedial writing (that is, taught the last-chance seniors who had still not passed the exam by the end of my eleventh-grade course) had only three students in her entire class—two of mine who hadn't passed, and one new transfer student. I had hit upon something that would change forever the way I teach writing and the way I think about grading papers. Not only had I provided a kind of semi-retirement for that twelfth-grade remedial writing teacher, but I had also considerably lightened my own load as well. Since all the student essays were evaluated *in class*, with the students, I had not had to haul those essays home night after night and weekend after ruined weekend. A brilliant breakthrough, and all from the casual advice of an otherwise tedious school administrator.

The Past Is Prologue

Before I launch into the nuts and bolts of how I conduct peer evaluation sessions in my community college composition classes, I must beg your patience while I retrace a bit of the sweep of history in the teaching of writing over the last three decades, with the hope of convincing you that peer evaluation awaits us as a natural final step toward a genuinely student-centered classroom.

The "current-traditional" model of teaching composition—that is, the model that predates both the writing process and the collaborative learning movements—assigns to the instructor the locus of control in three areas:

- control of the specific topics students will write about,
- control of the summative comments on their finished papers,
- and control of the assignment of a grade on those papers.

I hate sports analogies every bit as much as you do, but eleven years of teaching in American high schools leaves one with a few bad habits, not the least of which is the tendency to

use sports analogies to explain things. So, to use a baseball analogy, a teacher working under the current-traditional model functions as an umpire (judging student performances, assigning grades) and as a tenth-inning commentator (telling students after the fact what they did wrong and right on their papers). The instructor's workload is heavy under such a system—quite a bit heavier than that of colleagues in other department—if only because writing teachers assign more papers.

The Writing Process model made great headway at transferring that first locus of control by encouraging students to discover their own writing topics. But it landed a new fourth locus of control—the formative comments on students' drafts—squarely in the instructor's lap. To continue the baseball analogy, under the Writing Process model the instructor serves as a coach during the drafting phases, but as an umpire and tenth-inning commentator when judging students' final performances. The teacher's workload, clearly, is terrible, since by reading and commenting on drafts he has effectively doubled or tripled his paper load. He becomes, in fact, the bottleneck in the classroom; his own handling of the paper load becomes the limiting factor in determining how much writing can be assigned.

Fortunately, within just a few years, the collaborative learning movement collided with the writing process movement to spark a synergy that fundamentally altered the way writing is taught in this country. Teachers began to show students in workshop groups how to write formative comments on each other's drafts. Peer response workshops and peer editing sessions finally had their day in the sun. It was a giant leap forward toward student-centered classrooms, certainly, and yet teachers have continued to retain for themselves the locus of control in the last two areas: summative comments on final drafts and the assignment of a grade. Students learned to help each other write papers; but at the end of the day, they still wrote them to please the instructor—to suit her mysterious and internal standards of quality which they only dimly understood. Thus was born that most ubiquitous of student complaint, "I don't know what she wants."

This process-orientation with peer workshop collaboration has been considered "best practice" for the better part of two decades now; it dominates teacher preparation and published research in the field—though its adoption among secondary teachers sadly lags its enthusiastic support at the college level, for reasons any harried teacher of 180 fourteen-year-olds will gladly share with you. The instructor's load is heaviest of all under this model, since she serves, not only as one of her students' many coaches, but also as sole umpire, tenth-inning commentator not to mention her new role as facilitator of their little workshop groups. In addition to the burdensome workload, two other drawbacks stand out as well:

- since the instructor is still our only evaluator, students ultimately write for an audience of one;
- and since students are charged with the task of coaching each other without themselves sufficiently having internalized the qualities of good writing, they all too frequently are, as the expression goes, the blind leading the blind.

The peer evaluation model I use today addresses all three of these shortcomings.

The Next Frontier: Peer Evaluation

I remember seeing once a woodpecker who had, evidently, grown tired of bashing his skull against trees in search of bugs. Instead, this woodpecker was flying from car to car in a parking lot, sampling the fresh bugs right off the grillwork of the cars. My years spent hauling home huge stacks of papers to grade seemed just like bashing my head against a tree, always thinking that if I just bashed myself a little harder, wrote more comments, stayed up later, that somehow my students would become more independent and competent writers. What I needed, though, was not a way to work harder but a way to work smarter.

My experience in California public schools training students to become evaluators of their own writing competency exams opened up for me a new possibility. It showed me that I could let go of those last two remaining loci of control—assigning a grade to papers and writing the summative comments—and that doing so could benefit both me and my students. Letting go

of the control of grades is the last crossing in the frontier of student-centered learning. We have already crossed the two great rivers of the Mississippi and the Missouri (that is, control over topic and control over comments on drafts); but for two decades now we have been stalled by the terrifying heights of crossing the Rockies as well. We have been afraid of what might happen if we let go our control of the grades our students' papers receive, afraid that we might be surrendering too much as teachers.

To justify our resistance to such a drastic change, we haul out all the same excuses we formerly used to defend against previous paradigm shifts in the teaching of writing: "Students are not trained to do the task properly," we say. Or "It's the blind leading the blind." Or "It will inevitably lead toward mediocrity." But just as we have found that students can (and should!) learn how to discover their own topics, and how to help each other improve their writing, so too should students be learning to evaluate writing.

What I am proposing is not just another clever classroom strategy to ease the nasty job of grading a stack of papers every night and two stacks on weekends. I see it as a radically democratic shift. As Dennie Wolf incisively asks, "Are the students who keep writing C papers doing so because they are C people, or because they have never seen what B and A papers look like? 'Too often in American public schools, the difference between C and A is a profound secret. Too often an A is the private property of those students who happen to be able to perform because of personal grit, or personal skills, or because they get it at the breakfast table. The most fundamental mandate of American public schools ought to be to make that kind of knowledge knowledge of what it takes to succeed—a common property of every child who crosses their thresholds'" (42).

How can a student be expected to make her papers more like those of the top students if she never sees any paper but her own? Sure, she reads the model essays in her textbook—Didion, Dillard, Orwell, E. B. White—but how can she be expected to recognize and respect quality writing if her entire experience in school has been having her own fledgling creations utterly eclipsed by the brilliant pieces published in the textbook? She can't learn to drive by watching

the Grande Prix. No, she needs to see the creations of students like herself—or rather, students just a bit better than herself. And she needs not merely to glimpse those creations but to consider carefully *in her own mind* what makes them better quality than her own. Slavish imitation of the kind of writing *the teacher* says deserves merit will only lead to meretricious prose—teacher-pleaser humbug. Instead, the student must conduct her own search-and-recovery mission in the pursuit of quality; she must *herself* sort out the strong from the mediocre, and she must articulate *for herself* what qualities she values in good writing. "Simply put," retired University of Iowa professor John F. Huntley writes, "education for a democracy ought to teach the discovery and pursuit of quality by democratic, not by autocratic, means. So let us expand value-sorting to embrace not only the discriminations of one teacher, but also those of all twenty-six apprentice writers" (293).

And yet, maybe what I am proposing is really not so new after all. Maybe it is a kind of throwback to those student orations our great-great-grandparents had to do in school—long before the rise of "current-traditional" practices, and long before the old skill-and-drill worksheets were made possible by the mimeograph machine. Those classroom orations were not done for a grade but for audience approval. The mania for breaking writing down into arbitrary essay forms and superficial matters of correctness came along later, as the assessment tail began to wag the educational dog, and students were expected to produce these quantifiable bits for teachers to tally up: "Johnny included a thesis statement in his introductory paragraph, he chose the point-by-point method of comparison/contrast, he used three transition statements between paragraphs; but he loses points for his three comma splices and two dangling modifiers. 82%. B-minus."

What have we done? We have taken writing out of its natural environment of *somebody trying to say something to somebody and have the desired effect* and imprisoned it in an artificial environment where the object is *for students to pretend to be saying something new and important about a subject they pretend to care about to a pretend audience called the teacher, who is herself pretending to care about this particular essay even though it is the 150th so far on*

the same topic, and who is very probably too distracted by those two comma splices to really take in whatever message that student is pretending to transmit.

What I am proposing with student peer evaluation is, essentially, a return to the model of those old classroom oratories where audience approval is at the center, where the audience is a genuine one the student knows and earnestly wants to impress—and where the student members of that audience can observe directly what it is the more successful students do.

Nuts and Bolts of Conducting a Peer Evaluation Session

It feels important to say up front that the way I actually conduct a peer evaluation session is very much a work in progress. In fact, one of the ways I have been able to sell it to reluctant students is to emphasize how radical and groundbreaking it all is, and how very much I need their in-put on how I can continue to make the sessions more efficient and more fair. When I invite students to participate in this grand experiment—rather than simply decree peer evaluation as a done deal they will be required to submit to—I win both their willing participation and their helpful suggestions for improvement.

What we currently do is this:

Students submit their papers without any names on them, just student numbers. If peer evaluators can see the names of writers, there is a chance their evaluation will be affected by such things as knowing what score the writer received last time, or knowing the writer's gender, or knowing English is not the writer's native tongue, or even knowing the writer from back in high school. Barbie, after all, will always find Ken's words much sweeter that Poindexter's; Archie will always read Veronica's essay with more attentiveness than he reads Betty's; and Jughead's smudgy attempts will always be dismissed out of hand. So we read all the papers anonymously.

I put together their usual four-member workshop group with one other four-member group, to form an eight-member Quality Evaluator Team. I then give this team a stack of around eight, but as many as ten, anonymous essays written by students from other sections of the same

course. I never put students in the position of having to evaluate a member of their own class, just as I never have papers from the same workshop group evaluated against one another. To do so would undermine the climate of writers-helping-writers I try to establish in the classroom. After all, why in the world would a grade-conscious student want to help a peer improve a paper if their two essays were ultimately to be scored against each other?

The first thing they do is list the various essay titles in the middle column of a three-column form, under the heading "On Target." The term refers to an essay's successful fulfillment of the criteria for that assignment. The act of writing the titles in the On Target column is crucial; it is a tangible reminder that we assume all the essays are more or less On Target for the assignment *until argued otherwise.* When I first experimented with peer evaluation, I simply asked the teams to arrange the papers by quality and—surprise, surprise—most of the essays received a mark of above average, with a few outstanding and a few considered merely average. I could almost feel the ghost of old norm-referencers laughing at me. So to avoid what I call the Lake Wobegon—you know, where all the children are above average—we begin every Quality Evaluation session on the assumption that all papers are in the mid-range until argued otherwise. When you approach evaluation this way, the papers more or less balance themselves on either side of the norm.

That done, students each take up a paper from the stack and begin reading. They make note of what particular strengths and weaknesses they see in the essay, and offer any advice they might have for the writer on this or future essays. When they are finished reading and commenting on an essay, they pick up another one, and so on around the circle, working steadily through the stack, as each student adds a few more helpful comments to each essay.

When the reading phase is completed, we take a little break and then come back to sort the essays by quality. Again, to bolster the presupposition that an essay is On Target unless argued otherwise, we put all the team's stack of essays into one pile labeled *On Target.* Then, students discuss and decide which papers, if any, Exceeded the Expectations of the readers (who of course have themselves also written for the assignment), and which papers, if any, still Need

Work. These are the broad strokes of the group's consensus, and it is essential that they make these broad discriminations first.

Only after the two extremes of Needs Work and Exceeds Expectations have been moved to the left and right of the central On Target pile, can the team engage in any further discriminations among the remaining On Target papers. All of the On Target papers will have more or less competently fulfilled the criteria for a successful response to the assignment, but within that rubric of On Target there remains quite a range of quality. So, if they choose, the team may make further discriminations, deciding to call some papers On Target Minus or On Target Plus.

When I first began experimenting with peer evaluation, I asked students to sort the papers among five levels of quality, much as teachers do with A, B, C, D, and F. But if students are asked from the outset to rate the papers into five levels, they invariably want to work only with the three middle levels, avoiding any extreme grades. And if you insist upon their using the full spread of five, the reliability from one team to another drops considerably. So I have found that the first task must be to split the papers along broad categories, pulling out the best and weakest. That's why I use only three broad levels: Needs Work, On Target, and Exceeds Expectations. Only *afterwards* may students take a second look at that large mid-range pile, the On Targets, to make finer distinctions among the papers if they so choose.

One of my colleagues prefers a four-level system, where students must find the quality midpoint and arrange the papers on either side of it. This has the positive effect of forcing students to make some tough decisions about quality—nothing can easily slip through the net and land automatically in the mid-range pile. But personally I think such a system is unnecessarily brutal to the average students since exactly half of them will always come out on the bottom. Besides, at some point the distinctions between papers become too fine to be of much importance. I mean, if you hold up two nearly identical mid-range papers and have to decide which is above and which below, you may pretty soon find yourself down the road of arguing with students about which is worse, a comma splice or a split infinitive. (I say the

comma splice: what do *you* think?) At a certain point, it's just not worth it. So I tell my students to begin by sorting among only three broad ranges.

I have learned not to use letter grades at all during peer evaluation because students have their own ideas of what an A paper is and what a C paper is, just as we do, and so they would naturally tend to compare the papers against their own internal and idiosyncratic standards, instead of one paper against the range of others in the same pile. In other words, students may disagree about what an A paper should look like, or a B or a C or a D; but given a stack of papers they certainly can come to agreement about which papers are the strongest in the pile, which are the weakest, and which seem pretty much normal.

I have found better success using descriptive words to label the categories—Needs Work, On Target, Exceeds Expectations. Students seem better able to accept that the mid-range score of On Target is a sign of success—it means they have competently met the demands of the assignment, writing at the level that is expected of them—rather than thinking of a mid-range score as an insult of some kind, *merely average*, mediocre.

When I first began experimenting with peer evaluation, I tallied the individual scores given by all the members of the Quality Evaluator team to arrive at an average score. (Professor Huntley has developed a nifty bit of software to do just that. Unlike Professor Huntley's purely norm-referenced approach of comparing the essays against each other, my students and I develop and work from a scoring rubric, making our scoring practices at least somewhat criterion-referenced.) But i soon discovered that I was interested not so much in an average score as in the team's *consensus* score. Indeed, the animated discussions that go on as they attempt to reach consensus are surely the most educational part of the whole process.

A word on consensus: it is not simply a vote of the majority. It must never become the will of only one or two forcefully vocal team members (even if that team member happens also to be the teacher!) Part of my role as an *ex officio* member of every Quality Evaluator team is to see to it that everyone speaks up and contributes in some way to the group consensus.

Just as consensus is not the same as a majority vote, so too does it not require unanimity. Taking my cue from the world's foremost practitioners of consensus-building, the Quakers, I talk to my students about what I call a "Spectrum of Dissent." For example, one or a few team members may quietly dissent from the consensus but still allow it to go forward. Or, if their dissent is a bit stronger than that, they may insist upon "minuting" their dissent in the form of a note to the author of the paper in question. And if their dissent is quiet strong indeed, they may even go so far as to single-handedly obstruct the consensus of the group; I instruct them that they *should* block consensus if their heart tells them the rest of the team's consensus is unwise or unfair. Quakers consider dissent healthy and are careful never to dismiss it in favor of the will of the majority.

And with good reason! I have yet to see a team fail to come to consensus over a lousy paper. Everyone recognizes, it seems, when an essay is lazy or thin or dishonest. The strong dissent—on those rare occasions when it happens at all—always centers around essays that are so creative, so wacky, so wonderfully unexpected as responses to the assignment, that the Quality Evaluator team just cannot figure out what to make of it. Typically, the weaker and the average writers on the team will hate the paper and insist it fails to meet the goals of the assignment, while the better writers on the team—the closet poets—will argue it is the best piece they have seen in a good long while. Their consensus is blocked, as well it should be, and they send the essay back to me to deal with separately.

As mentioned before, I myself serve as an *ex officio* member of every Quality Evaluator team, modeling for them the ways I write comments and the kinds of things I think are important in a quality piece of writing. But my goal, always, is to wean the Quality Evaluator teams from me. As the semester matures, I speak up less and less in the group as I witness them internalizing of the standards of quality writing.

From time to time, if I suspect the range of quality in a stack of papers is fairly narrow (and this tends to happen over time as the weaker writers catch on to what it is the On Target writers have been doing), I toss into the pile a few ringers—outstandingly good and bad essays

from past students. This is also a way for me to test the reliability of the procedure: does an Exceeds Expectations paper from one semester receive the same score in a subsequent semester? Does a Needs Work essay continue to fall short from one semester to another?

At the end of a Quality Evaluation session we set aside a little time to debrief, to discuss exactly what it was that the better papers did, so that students know what to do in their own papers next time. Instead of hoping students will bother to read the marginalia a teacher has written on their finished papers and will actually heed that advice next time, this peer evaluation model requires students to figure out *for themselves* what seems to work well, to articulate it, to identify examples of it—and so to be in a much better position to incorporate *their own* advice in their next assignment.

After a Quality Evaluation session is finished, back in my office I spy on the various teams' decisions to reassure myself that the standards from one team to the next are pretty much the same. If I doubt a team's decision on a paper, I simply toss it into a pile for another class to read and see if they come up with the same score. If they do, then I consider the possibility that *I* may be misreading the essay. After all, I know the writers, so I may be prejudiced one way or another: demanding much more out of a strong student I know can do better, or conversely, anticipating that a strong writer will have written a better paper than she actually has. Likewise, I may overrate a paper written by a weak student just because I am overjoyed to see any serious attempt at all. It is too tempting for me to grade, unconsciously, on how hard I think the student worked on a paper, or on how well I am accustomed to the student performing on other papers. So if two independent teams both agree upon a score different from what I alone might give, I generally go with the teams' score. But if, as more often happens, the second group's score confirms my earlier suspicions, I will discard the first group's score and use the second group's. On the whole, though, there is surprisingly little disagreement, either among the groups or between the groups and me—especially after the teams have been through the process a few times. With a little practice, they become quite adept at recognizing quality writing when they

see it, just as we all had to do when we first became English teachers and faced our first mountains of papers to grade.

How do the students feel about being evaluated by their peers? A bit suspicious at first—as perhaps you are, as well—until they begin to see that the group consensus is probably more fair than a grade from a lone teacher. But most of the students I get nowadays are accustomed, from their high school English courses, to group workshopping, collaborative projects, peer editing, and so on; so my Quality Evaluator teams just seem like the natural extension of that. This doesn't mean they rejoice at the scores their peers give them! They still all like to think they are above average, and they resent being told otherwise, by their peers as much as by their teachers. So yes, of course they complain, especially at first. But what has changed is *my role* when they complain. I no longer have to defend the grade because it didn't come from me—or at least not from me alone. Instead, I become a coach helping them to understand *why* the team scored it as they did, and helping them to envision what could now be done to improve it.

Do students ever challenge the peer evaluation scores they receive? Of course. But back when I graded every paper myself, I encountered more challenges to a grade than I do now. Back then, the students knew that grade was merely one man's opinion; with peer evaluation, they know their score represents a group consensus. Still, every semester I face a small but vocal minority of students who believe, somehow, that they will get a fairer grade from me at 2:00 a.m. —bleary-eyed from the ninety papers I just read before theirs—than from a group of fellow students meeting together with me and arriving at a group consensus of how to score their paper. This is understandable, given that all their previous English teachers have invoked the Doctrine of Teacher Infallibility as a final, indisputable defense of a challenged grade. Sometimes it is an insecure student who fears she will not be *liked* by these student evaluators (who in fact will never even meet her except through her writing). More often, it is a student who quickly understands that, although he may be able to b.s. his teachers, his peers will see b.s. for what it is, and so he may have to actually try harder in this course than in previous ones.

I have one sweeping remedy for students' challenges to their peer evaluation score: if a student has received a score on any paper less than fully On Target—in other words, a score of Needs Work or On Target Minus—that student is invited to revise the paper yet again, or as many times as necessary, in an attempt to bring it up to On Target. This does not mean they can simply send the same essay to me as a kind of Court of Appeals; they must significantly revise the paper first, taking into consideration the kinds of remarks the team made about their paper. Just knowing that option exists seems to quell the initial resistance to peer evaluation. They have, after all, nothing to lose.

And why *not* let them try again for a better grade after they have had a chance to see what the better writers did? The students whose papers utterly bombed want (and deserve) another chance to improve their work. It's not as though the world has only a limited number of On Target scores. If I could convince every weak student to revise and revise again until they all eventually attained On Target scores, wouldn't that be a *good* thing?

But I am very clear with my students that they cannot simply resubmit the very same paper to me and expect a better grade. This is not an appeal process. I never let myself get caught up in defending a peer evaluation team's consensus score, though the owner of the paper may try very hard to enlist me in that fight. Instead, I talk with them about *why* their paper might have received the score it did and what they think they might do to remedy the problem. It changes my role for the better; I become an interpreter of the score and a coach to the student who seeks to improve it, rather than a defender of the score.

So (you are no doubt wondering), am I swamped with resubmitted papers to score on my own? Back to where I started, hauling home piles of resubmitted papers to mark each night? The answer, sadly, is no. I am amazed, frankly, at how few students take me up on my offer to regrade as many new revisions as they give me. Maybe that's just because I myself would have been one of those grade-hounds clamoring and clambering for the top position no matter what it took, so I am always a little surprised to rediscover that most students aren't like me. Nothing would make me happier than for *every* student to resubmit their less-than-On Target attempts,

and to so swamp me that I had to set up special Quality Evaluator Teams just to handle the resubmissions. I would love that, but I doubt it will ever happen. Most students receive the kind of score they expect to get—indeed, have always gotten—and they accept that fatalistically, as if no further effort of their own could ever alter it.

What Are the Advantages of the Peer Evaluation Model?

• students write for an audience of readers they understand

Students are writing for a more authentic audience—their peers—rather than just for some old teacher. And by participating in peer evaluation sessions they become no longer just producers of writing but consumers of it as well. If you will allow me to tap that sports analogy one last time, these Quality Evaluator sessions, as I call them, are something like those locker room hours athletes devote to watching videotapes of their own games: they are learning to see themselves as their fans see them. So too must student writers evaluate their own performances in order to learn to see their writing as readers see it.

• students internalize an idea of quality writing

• grades may actually be fairer because they are seasoned by the process of consensus. With a bit of coaching, conscientious students are every bit as able to recognize quality writing as we are. Their consensus scores do not differ much from my own as a teacher; and when they do, I take a second look at a paper and more often than not I decide that their evaluation was fairer than my initial one.

• the act of evaluating becomes a learning opportunity for students, instead of an out-of-class drudgery for the teacher

While working with students during evaluative sessions, the teacher is able to articulate to students her notions of what makes for quality writing. So the act of evaluating, instead of being just another out-of-class chore for the teacher, becomes yet another learning opportunity

for students. The conversations that grow out of our evaluative sessions, *alone*, are enough reason to do it.

• the teacher still reads every paper but is unburdened of hauling papers home every night

The teacher still reads all the papers, but the workload is confined to class time (and goes much faster), so the teacher is not hauling home stacks of papers night after night for lonely midnight grading during Letterman and Leno.

• standards of quality shift upward as the semester goes on

Student evaluators are merciless with peers who do not continue to show improvement throughout the semester. That is, if a student starts the course writing mid-level papers but does not improve as the course continues, that stagnated writer soon falls behind into the lower level, with little sympathy from the evaluators since they know very well how many opportunities that student has been given to improve. As students' eye for quality writing improves, their standards continue to shift upward throughout the semester. What counts as average at the beginning of the semester is nowhere near as good as what counts as average at the end.

We performed an in-class experiment to see if this was true. We selected papers that received a mid-range score from each of the major assignments of the semester, and then read them all against each other. Lo and behold, the papers considered mid-range at the beginning of the term were the weakest, while the mid-range papers from the end of the term were the strongest. In other words, not only were students improving as writers, their standards of quality were increasing as well. So the students who had complained about working harder and harder on each new paper but still getting the same mid-range score finally had their answer. What they suspected was, indeed, true: even to keep getting the same score they had to keep writing better all term. They had to grow as writers throughout the semester *just to stay average*.

This improvement as both composers and evaluators of writing would be amazing on its own if the difficulty of the writing tasks remained constant over the semester. For example, if we only wrote narratives for each assignment, it would be satisfying enough to find solid evidence

of growth across the full ability-range of students. But the wonder of these findings is even more wondrous when you consider that each new assignment was designed to be a bit more difficult than the one before. We wrote not just personal narratives but also researched expository and persuasive pieces. So the demands of each new assignment toughened, and the standards of the evaluators toughened too, and yet the writers still demonstrated improvement. Now that is significant!

A teacher's standards of quality tend to remain fixed throughout the semester, signaling to the *A* paper writer at the beginning of the term that her papers will continue to pull *A*s right to the end without a great deal more effort. But with the students' upward shift of quality standards, the top writers soon discover that they too must keep improving just to maintain their high scores, since the mid-range writers will soon suss them out and imitate whatever they see those better writers doing.

Because of this, the peer evaluation model offers a better challenge for top-level writers, where quality becomes a continuous pursuit. But the most easily seen improvement comes from students who begin the course writing the lowest level papers. For the first time ever, they get a chance to see exactly what it is those better writers have been doing all along. They figure out what it is that gives them away as poor writers, and they seek help to correct it. So we found in our little classroom experiment that even the low level papers at the end of the course were not half bad compared to the way those same students wrote on the first assignment.

So what about the students' grades for the course? In my composition courses, half their grade is based on the process and half on their final product. These Quality Evaluator scores on their final drafts comprise the product grade. The process grade includes things like meeting deadlines for drafts, generous participation in their writing workshops, group presentations, editing skills work, and so on—all the daily things that lead up to those final products. So, if a student consistently writes On Target papers all semester *and* keeps up with all the work for their process grade, my computer's gradebook software defines that as a grade of B. Getting On Target Plus papers all term, as well as assiduous work throughout the process, results in a score

at the top of the B+ range. In other words, to win a course grade of A, at least some of a student's essays must Exceed the Expectations of the Quality Evaluator Team. To my mind, that is what an A means.

At the other end, even if a student can never write better than Needs Work, so long as she is meeting deadlines, workshopping, revising, and so on, then that student can still come away with a D in the course. Every semester I have to fail a few people for being poor *students*—that is, for skipping class, blowing off deadlines, and such—but I never fail a steady and hard-working student who simply happens to be a weak writer. If we ever go to a system of minimum competency testing, I suppose I would have to fail that student too; but until that day comes, I refuse to.

"But you are the certified teacher, not the students," I have been told. "Aren't you shirking your responsibility by giving students the power to assign grades to papers?" Well, I don't know about you, but I was never certified as an essay evaluator. In all those Methods courses I took in grad school, I never once had specific training in how to grade student papers. And yet, as a young working teacher, there were weeks when I spent as many total hours grading papers as I did teaching. I learned how, probably like the rest of you, on Sunday afternoons during my first year of teaching. I *am* certified as a composition teacher—that is, as someone licensed to help students recognize and produce quality writing. And when I look out on my classroom and see a team of students engaged in a lively debate over the merits or weaknesses of a student essay, hashing out for themselves what really contributes to quality writing, then all my licensed and certificated teacher instincts tell me that I am on the right track.

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